

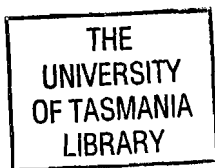
# **Supervising Doctorates Downunder**

**KEYS TO EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION IN  
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND**

Edited by Carey Denholm  
and Terry Evans

ACER Press

Morris  
LB  
2386  
'586  
2007



First published 2007  
by ACER Press, an imprint of  
Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd  
19 Prospect Hill Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124

[www.acerpress.com.au](http://www.acerpress.com.au)  
[sales@acerpress.edu.au](mailto:sales@acerpress.edu.au)

Text © 2007 Carey Denholm and Terry Evans  
Design and typography © 2007 ACER Press

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Edited by Ronél Redman  
Cover design and typesetting by Mason Design  
Printed in Australia by Shannon Books

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Supervising doctorates downunder: keys to effective  
supervision in Australia and New Zealand.

ISBN 9780864314307.

1. Doctor of philosophy degree - Australia. 2. Doctor of  
philosophy degree - New Zealand. 3. Research - Methodology.  
4. Graduate students - Australia. 5. Graduate students -  
New Zealand. 6. Dissertations, Academic - Australia. 7.  
Dissertations, Academic - New Zealand. I. Denholm, Carey J.,  
1951-. II. Evans, Terry D. (Terry Denis).

378.1550994

Bib 806-0  
10 3-14-1

A 7002 1427224B

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# *Self-care for the supervisor: A personal account*

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## INTRODUCTION

To write about the care of the self is to engage in a discussion that is simultaneously very private and very public. Take first the personal elements of self-care. We all have views about what it means to look after our body, our emotional and mental wellbeing, and our spiritual welfare. Consciously or unconsciously, some of us may privilege one of these domains over others, while some may seek to balance them holistically. Our views on self-care may or may not coincide with actual practices, and both views and practices will change over time according to context and setting. In this sense, self-care is highly personal and contingent.

Take next the public elements of self-care—a phrase I mean in two ways. First, the self (which I will describe as an individual's understanding of himself or herself as coherent and autonomous) is also a product of complex and ongoing processes of socialisation and enculturation. All things being equal, these shared processes will equip an individual to live with others in a given community or communities. Thus, self-care is always and already mediated by these other processes and, in this sense, is public. Second, self-care is public because its effects are registered not simply by the self, but by others, some of whom the individual may be responsible for or to whom they are accountable. Thus, capacity for self-care may have significant influence on others, perhaps as a result of our experiencing diminished competence or, conversely, because we are in a position to meet or exceed expectations, for example.

The supervision of graduate research candidates is a set of privileges and responsibilities that tends to prioritise their care, and rightly so. It involves

someone taking ‘the key responsibility for coordinating, communicating and managing the candidature as well as overall responsibility for guidance, direction and advancement of the thesis and ensuring that the candidate is informed about the quality of the thesis’ (University of Tasmania 2006). It also involves the creation of a relationship of trust based on the mutual exploration of intellectual puzzles intended to contribute to common-good scholarship. Given these parameters, some (re)orientation of thought and action to ensure self-care by the supervisor need not imply any loss of care to the candidate. Indeed, it is my central premise that self-care is immensely important for supervisor and candidate, providing crucial renewal to the first, and vital role-modelling to the second.

In this chapter I discuss the importance of self-care for the supervisor, and the work presented is both personal and public. It draws on my own experiences as a supervisor of 57 honours and masters coursework and graduate research candidates over the period from 1996 to the present. It also draws on observations of others in my role as a graduate research coordinator in a university department with 17 profile staff and between 70 and 80 research higher degree candidates. Indebted in particular to works by Covey (1989, 2003) and Dowrick (1995, 1997), in what follows I focus on four layers of self-care and share key insights on the manifold benefits of looking after oneself.

## LAYERS OF SELF-CARE FOR THE SUPERVISOR

In various works, Stephen Covey expands upon a series of key habits for living that he suggests are hallmarks of leadership. If one accepts that supervision is a form of facilitative leadership (a means by which to provide an early career research scholar with constructive conceptual, organisational, intellectual and other forms of scaffolding), then these key habits are illuminating. My summation of Covey’s (1989, 2003) work follows:

- *Habits that advance private victories and constitute a move from dependence to independence*
  - Be proactive and response-able.
  - Be centred in correct principles and begin with the ends in mind.
  - Be value-focused around life’s priorities; think ‘first things first’.
- *Habits that advance public victories and constitute a move from independence to interdependence*
  - Build rich and enduring relationships; think ‘win-win’.
  - Seek first to understand and then to be understood.
  - Be creatively cooperative and see the potential in all things. Work for mutually beneficial solutions.
- *Habits that underpin interdependence and self-in-community*
  - Renew: remember to live well (physical care), love (emotional care), learn (mental care) and leave a legacy (spiritual care).

- Find your voice through facilitative leadership and help others to find theirs.

Dowrick describes an understanding of social, personal, collective and spiritual development that is consonant with Covey. She maintains the absolute centrality of love, generosity, thoughtfulness and mindfulness, kindness, giving and peace. Both draw in different ways upon an older idea that Covey attributes in his books to a survivor of the Nazi death camps, Viktor Frankl—namely that between stimulus and response is a space, and in that space lie our freedom and power to choose our response, and in that response lie our growth and our happiness. Foundational tasks for self-care, care of others and of the Earth may be enacted in such spaces.

Over more than a decade of post-doctoral academic life, it has become apparent to me (indeed it seems axiomatic) that universities everywhere are complex and highly pressured environments. They are deeply bureaucratic and embedded in forms of conduct underpinned by neoliberal governmental practices and value systems. Yet they remain populated by scholars committed to the project of higher education to advance knowledge for diverse and (generally) beneficent means and ends. Nevertheless, it is also my experience that this last and arguably most important goal of university life is affected by the exigencies of late modernity in ways that erode the quality of our service to others and our care of self. As I have become increasingly busy with departmental and university-wide academic administration, having simultaneously retained both ‘normal’ undergraduate and postgraduate teaching responsibilities and developed a high supervisory load, I have had to decide how I wanted to *be* in the world as an academic. This ontological question has required that I think about self-care in ways that move beyond the *me* to the *we*—to thinking about how self-care is crucial to thrive in academic life and demonstrate to candidates (and always non-judgementally) that intellectual lives in organisational settings can be simply and deeply rewarding, especially if they prioritise regular and consistent periods of mindful self-care.

Let me elaborate on the *how* of some of the insights I have gained from rethinking my ways of being a supervisor and an academic. The usual caveats apply: I cannot describe all possible aspects of self-care; I am not ‘expert’ in all domains; by separating each form of care there is a risk of suggesting that they are not integrated. What I have to convey is far from a one-size-fits-all ‘take’ on self-care and the supervisor. Nevertheless, it may resonate with at least a proportion of the readership.

## Physical care

Let me focus, perhaps predictably, on sleep, diet and exercise. Slumber is vital for cellular healing, growth and restoration. Tearoom stories about it often centre on tactics to get to sleep and stay asleep. Colleagues jest about dreaming restlessly



about candidates' revisions. Others refer to the 'radar effect' or completing 'audits' of candidates at 2 am, wondering why they haven't heard a 'blip' from John or Jane for a while. Some feel jaded during daylight hours, producing what they perceive as substandard lectures, having insufficient 'oomph' to write coherent arguments in their papers, or becoming 'cranky' with candidates who 'fail to deliver'. Some joke about midnight raids on the fridge, their BBC addiction, warm baths, meditation, medication.

Perhaps 'whatever works' is best where insomnia is rare or short-lived. Where it is habitual, colleagues who 'go with the flow' tell me they no longer burn with resentment about being awake when they 'should' be asleep and some have noted that productive periods of problem solving attend longer bouts of insomnia. These days, when I wake with a candidate's welfare in my head, I realise the matter can wait and so go back to sleep, although it took practice to get to that point. When the new day arrives, I contact the candidate and work with them to try and ensure *they* have mechanisms, support systems and practices in place to assist them. The recognition that empathy does not demand that I entirely solve someone else's challenges has been a very significant step in my self-care—and I sleep better too.

Five years ago, I was advised to rethink my diet, increase the amount of low-fat protein I consumed, decrease the intake of highly processed carbohydrate products, watch that extra glass of wine after dinner, and move! I have been lifting weights and walking ever since and have changed my diet, and have been immensely glad that I did both. I have more physical strength, and that has been important in the field where I tire less readily; physical manifestations of stress are reduced; my posture is better; the aches and pains have largely gone—except when I forget that writing for four straight hours at a computer is just plain silly. I often let candidates know how fantastic I feel by investing just five hours a week in my physical wellbeing. I couch this message in terms of how it has helped me to better fulfil my obligations: first things first and ends in mind. I hope I have avoided moralising, but a key idea has been to convey that we all need to remember that we are worth the investment. As Dowrick (1991) notes, what 'is needed as a starting point is a sense, no matter how tentative, that your own life is worth some attention, and that your own self is worth discovering' (p. 26).

## Emotional care

In my experience, a key task in self-care is constantly to practise strategies that enhance maturity, empathy and confidence. Let me deal with each in turn.

First, doctoral candidature is a high-level and complex training ground for professionals across a range of disciplines to prepare them for sophisticated,

multifaceted and demanding work, either inside or outside the higher education sector. It is a work contract that requires all parties to articulate, negotiate, document, understand and enact their roles. This contract needs to be explicit, whether or not candidates are on scholarship, mean to seek employment after completion or have full- or part-time status. A substantial part of candidature needs to be fostered by the supervisor, requiring emotional maturity. In the department I work in, at least a third of candidates are what might be termed 'lifestyle students' in their fifties and sixties, and many of them bring such emotional maturity to the task because they have been in high-pressured professional positions at some point. Many still are, and all are serious about their studies. In my experience, candidates who come straight through school to university, and through honours into the doctoral program, tend to find that 'work' ethos harder to manifest, and understandably so.

To my mind, our own capacities for emotional self-care (for being responsible, value-oriented and clear about our roles) are vital in constituting the ontological components of candidature. Those guidelines need to be explicitly articulated to all students, and to 'straight-through' students in particular. Clarity about how we are *being* in the process (or knowing that we provide a role model for mature and professional behaviour) is key to our own and our candidates' emotional wellbeing. 'Responsibility for others is crucial to living an emotionally mature life, but so is the capacity to acknowledge and take responsibility for one's own thoughts, feelings and actions: the effects they are having on others; the effects they are having on your own self' (Dowrick 2001, p. 18).

If emotional maturity characterises our own work practices—and therefore our approach to supervision—then we are more likely to realise one simple idea that promotes our capacity to be 'involved with detachment' and maintain our emotional wellbeing: *It's not about me*. Candidature is a profoundly important and extended opportunity to provide some assistance to an emergent scholar seeking to professionalise their skills, and emotional maturity is central to that task. Divesting the candidature of certain emotions (angst, ego or possessiveness not least among them), and investing it with empathic listening and questioning, are paramount if we are to avoid the interrelated traps of listening autobiographically and then constantly reliving our own scripts through our candidates.

It is my experience that if emotional maturity and empathy are embedded in our work (from supervisory strategies to collegial engagement), then confidence grows; and that strengthens our capacity to see supervision as an immense privilege that need not drain us of our own affective energies. We are less likely to be burdened by self-doubt in advising, because we are less inclined to draw on our own scripts and can then help candidates to help themselves to recognise, name, investigate, categorise, evaluate, monitor and act upon the problems that need to be solved by them during their candidatures.

## Mental care

The life of a healthy individual is characterised by fears, conflicting feelings, doubts, frustrations, as much as by positive feelings. *The main thing is that the man or woman feels that he or she is living his or her own life.* (Dowrick 2001, p. 22 [original emphasis])

Academic life is predicated on contemplation of one sort or another. It requires discipline, persistence, courage, tenacity, insight, optimism, critical and creative thought, passion and dedication—an exciting and exhausting list. Yet most academics I know are time-poor, and that does not bode well for our sense of wellbeing. Thus, if I were to characterise academic life as I perceive many of us to experience it, terms such as ‘ennui’, ‘stress’, ‘brain-fag’, ‘distractibility’ and ‘fragmentation’ would be there in the mix.

A year ago, I reached a point where it became crucial to be deliberate about looking after my own mental wellbeing: I became head of school and was determined that it would not be the death-knell to my intellectual development and scholarly pursuits. Without these, I feel my professional life is diminished and my contribution to my candidates ‘mere’ project management.

It may seem pedestrian but, for me, time management strategies have been central to the process of preserving my scholarship. As Covey (2003) would have it, these strategies increase our circles of influence and diminish our circles of concern and, as it turns out, have provided the scaffolding for my capacity to care for my physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. I spend one day a week with no appointments, working on my own publications and research projects, and am in the process of organising the department timetable so that, over two years, we free up one day from any teaching. I do not check my email on my research day, and tend not to check it on other days more than three times—morning, noon and late afternoon. I answer urgent and important emails at once, but leave others until Friday afternoons. I also use what is sometimes called a ‘tickler’ filing system: suspension files numbered 1–31 for the days of the month, and 1–12 for the months of the year. As work comes across my desk(top), deadlines are determined and work filed according to when it needs first to be dealt with—month to month, week to week, and daily. Since adopting the system, I have not missed a deadline and have felt on top of what has been a significant workload.

I have also started to work my diary so that, wherever possible, the first one or two hours of days that are not my research day may also be spent in writing, with appointments thereafter. Again, wherever possible, I schedule time at the day’s end to commune with an endangered species—I read. So seriously do I take this responsibility that, on the encouragement of staff, I have included a week’s reading in the academic workload formula in my department; it is not enough, but it is a start and symbolically important. In short, I have realised that the best way

for me to thrive and take care of my own mental wellbeing is to understand that I can't 'find' time; rather, I have 'made' time, and am better versed in the literature in my fields than I have been for some time. That currency has informed my own scholarship and is paying new dividends with my candidates and staff. I am also witnessing the value of showing them the time-management strategies I have in hand and, in turn, they assure me that the systems are helping their own work and capacity to avoid feeling stressed and mentally tired or out of control.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The spiritual dimension is your core, your center, your commitment to your value system ... And people do it very, very differently. (Covey 1989, p. 292)

In thinking about spiritual self-care, about how that form of care underpins and overlays all the others I have written about above, one singular insight prevails. There is great value in what I will call 'away times and spaces'. Once again, these need to be deliberately sought and protected. Some of them provide private and solitary opportunities for renewal: consciously sought periods during which one purposely reflects upon values, contributions to be made, ethics and personal and professional practice in relation to the ontological foundations of a life. Since I have cause to travel alone on a regular basis, I have become adept at using these times for contemplation, and find them deeply renewing of my core energies, enthusiasm and commitment to others, my candidates not least among them. Of course, these times and spaces need not always be solitary and private. Simple 'time out' with family and friends in convivial spaces and places of felt value can be immensely renewing of the spirit. Again, such times need to be prioritised and celebrated as core to our self-care such that we are centred and then able to serve others.

In closing, I stress that the supervision of research candidates is a set of privileges and responsibilities that tends to prioritise their care, and this should be the case. It is also important for supervisors to prioritise self-care in ways that move beyond the *me* to the *we*: to serve as *non-judgemental* role models. In testing times in higher education, it is vital to demonstrate to candidates that a scholarly existence can be immensely rewarding and contribute to the foundational mission of university life, especially when it is underpinned by mindful attention to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing.

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## QUESTIONS

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- 1 What is the hardest thing for you about taking care of yourself? And the thing that comes most readily? How do you currently approach your self-care in terms of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual domains?

- 2 As a supervisor, in the interface between personal care and professional care, what is working well and why? And what and how would you like to change about what is working less well? What would empower you to do so?
- 3 Imagine a candidate comes to you deeply concerned about their own wellbeing. While avoiding the temptation to rescue/disable or shift into autobiographical mode, how might you assist your candidate?

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